

cutting edge by thenewromantics

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternative Universe - Figure Skating, Enemies to Lovers, F/M, a lot of characters aren't even mentioned in the first chapter but i promise they're coming, aka the winter olympics au that no one asked for, anyways the whole gang is here but the focus is on mike & el, kind of??, other relationships will be added as they become prominent and relevant

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Mike Wheeler & Nancy Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-02-12

Updated: 2018-03-31

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:32:58

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 3

Words: 16,390

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

it's either work with the girl who annoys him to no end, even if she is the prettiest girl he's ever seen in his entire life, or kiss his dream of winning an olympic medal goodbye. for mike wheeler the answer might not be obvious but el hopper has more up her sleeve than just her perfect triple axle landings.

aka the rival ice skating au that absolutely nobody asked for.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

ok so fun fact, i absolutely love the winter olympics, especially figure skating, so i figure why not combine something i love a lot like figure skating with something else i love, like mike and eleven. thus creating this au. i have no idea how long this thing is going to be, but it's gonna be a fun ride so strap in kids. this idea just kind of came to me while watching figure skating on tv and i thought i would indulge my muse, so enjoy!

title comes from a movie that is also about figure skaters who are rivals forced to work together, but the plots aren't really that similar, i just enjoyed the title.

also fair warning, there are some f-bombs dropped in here (what can i say, mike swears when he's frustrated), but other than that, the content here isn't going to go anywhere above a t.

Mike Wheeler was having a bad day.

Fortunately, he had kind of seen the whole thing coming from a mile away. Things had been *off* for a while, and he had just been waiting for the other shoe to drop and just confirm the worst. Unfortunately, it was a shit fuck of a situation and he wouldn't wish on his worst enemy, and that was saying something.

His day started as most of his days had been in the last couple months, his alarm would wake him up from a dreamless sleep before the sun had peaked up over the horizon, he would shuffle around his small apartment before making his way out the door to get to the practice arena. It was a pretty dull life to live, but it was routine and Mike Wheeler thriving did well with routine.

However, this particular morning, things had been off since the

minute he opened his eyes. He went about his morning routine as he usually did, but things just felt *weird*. He wasn't exactly sure how to describe it, but he had a strange feeling in his gut, which didn't happen to him very often, so he knew it had to mean something.

So, when he showed up at the ice arena and saw his sister sitting there, her winter coat wrapped tightly around her body and her hair thrown up into a haphazard ponytail at the top of her head, he knew something was wrong.

"Nancy, what's going on?" He asked, approaching the bench where she was sitting. She had tears forming in the corner of her eyes and Mike felt his brotherly instinct kick in and he took a seat next to her, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

"Mike." Her voice was quiet and timid, and Mike felt a sense of dread crawling up his spine. Nancy was almost never like this, and it was putting him on edge. "I'm pregnant."

Her words hit Mike like a fucking wrecking ball. Of course his initial reaction was joy, Nancy was his older sister and despite her desire to never be stuck on the end of a cul-de-sac, he knew that ever since she and her husband, Jonathan, had married a last year, she had been thinking about having kids. And he definitely knew that she was thinking of retiring, but he certainly never thought she would be leaving him high and dry like this. Talk about bad fucking timing.

"Wow, Nance. That's great. I'm happy for you." Mike said, and he was.

"I'm really sorry, I swear that I never meant for it to time out like this." She took a deep breath and he could hear the shakiness in her voice. "I never wanted to do this to you."

He gave a small smile, trying to convey that he wasn't mad at her, because he wasn't. "I know, and I'm not mad or anything, I'll figure something out. I'm happy for you, I really am."

Nancy smiled slightly, nudging him lightly with her shoulder before she looked down at her hands. He knew that meant that she didn't really want to talk about it any further and honestly, Mike didn't

really want to talk about it either. The dread had made its way to his stomach and he felt like he was going to vomit, which he was trying really hard not to show all over his face.

Because, as excited as he was that Nancy, his older sister, was pregnant (and oh my god, he was going to be an *uncle* , holy shit), he was pretty damn upset that Nancy, his skating partner, was pregnant and therefore unable to compete with him anymore.

Fuck, he was so screwed.

"I should go." Nancy said suddenly, interrupting the slightly tense silence that had settled between them. "I'm just going to get depressed sitting here any longer." She mumbled, standing, causing Mike's arm to drop from her shoulder and fall to his side. He stayed sitting, unsure of how to approach the situation.

"I'll, um, see you later." He said, giving her a tense smile. "I'm sure mom will want to have us all over for dinner to celebrate or something."

Nancy snorted, shaking her head. "Yeah, and she'll spend the entire dinner talking about how she's way too young to be a grandma, while dad passes out on the La-Z-Boy and proves that he's just about the right age to be a grandpa."

Mike smiled, knowing that she was probably one hundred percent right about that. "Dad's been acting like a grandpa since we were kids, I think he was born to be a grandfather, actually."

At that, Nancy smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes and she had a weird look in her eye that just reminded Mike at the seriousness of the situation he was in. "You'll figure something out Mike, I know you will." She said softly, reaching out and squeezing his shoulder affectionately. "I'll see you later, little brother."

And with that, she was gone, swiftly walking away from him and disappearing into the lobby of the arena. It was once she was gone that Mike let the anger settle in.

"FUCK!" He exclaimed, kicking the side of the rink in front of him,

wincing when his toe made contact with the siding. Putting his head in his hands, he groaned, this was so *not* what he wanted to have to deal with.

He was so fucking screwed.

It had all started back when Mike was four. Nancy was seven and had just started taking ice skating lessons at the local ice arena back in their hometown of Hawkins. One day, his babysitter had canceled, leaving his mom with no other options then to bring Mike with her to Nancy's ice skating lesson.

Mike had been hooked instantly. Sure, he was only a kid and kids were intrigued by anything, but god, he remembers that day like it was yesterday. Nancy's lesson was just ending and some of the older kids were coming onto the ice and the way that they were spinning in the air was enough to leave Mike breathless.

They looked like they were flying and at that age, all Mike wanted to do was fly. More than once, his mom had scolded him for jumping off his bed and trying to fly, always telling him that one of these days he was going to hurt himself. But no, these kids, *boys*, were flying and Mike wanted to be just like them.

So, with just the right amount of begging and pleading, Mike convinced his mom to sign him up for ice skating lessons.

He wasn't in the same class as Nancy, her being in the six to eight age class, while Mike was with the younger kids, but it didn't matter, certainly not to Mike and honestly, Nancy was probably more relieved then anything that her younger brother wasn't stuck in the same class as her. Their mom happily brought them too and from lessons, happy to brag to anyone that would listen about how talented her kids were.

Their father on the other hand, was a little harder to convince. At

first, he had had no problem with Mike's interest in ice skating, he was only four, he would grow out it. But as Mike grew older, he only grew more passionate for the sport. He spent hours practicing outside of his lessons and soon it was pretty clear that this wasn't going to be something he ever "outgrew."

However, Ted become significantly less resistant when Mike took home his first trophy. Mike supposed that it didn't really matter too much to his dad what he was winning trophies in, as long as he was winning something.

Nancy and Mike quickly became known as two of the best skaters in Hawkins, their teacher certainly seemed to think so. It only seemed natural that they would eventually pair up and combine their skills. They were reluctant to pair up at first, their bickering off the ice causing a roadblock when they first started practicing together, but eventually they found a groove that worked for them and soon enough they were producing some of the best pair routines their teacher had ever seen.

(Their mother was extremely disappointed, however, when she realized that their teamwork and communication on the ice certainly didn't translate off, and they still bickered as much as they always did when they were at home.)

They won their first competition just weeks after Nancy's eighteenth birthday when Mike was fifteen. Mike had finally grown into all his limbs, his long legs allowing him to glide dynamically on the ice, his insistence for perfection always giving them extra technical points. Nancy, on the other hand, was much more artistic than her brother, and her tiny form allowed her to fly through the air higher than everyone else.

Together, they were unstoppable.

When Nancy started attending Indiana State, she came home once a week so her and Mike could practice together, and when Mike was ready to go to college, he too attended Indiana State so they could be in the same city.

They continued to win competitions and soon, they were known all

over Indiana as the best ice skating pair the state had ever seen. None of that seemed to affect either of them, Mike never really paid attention to what anyone else said. Sure, he liked winning, loved it even, but for him, it never really stopped being about flying.

Moving to Chicago seemed like the logical next step for Nancy and Mike once Mike had graduated. Chicago had gained quite a reputation for being a hot spot for skaters, and with talks about how Mike and Nancy could *easily* make the Olympic team in the upcoming years if they wanted, it was easily the next place that they wanted to be.

So that's what they did, they moved into a small apartment in downtown Chicago, and it all seemed to be smooth sailing.

That is, until Nancy fell in love with Jonathan Byers. Jonathan was the son of Joyce, who coordinated the rink that Nancy and Mike skated at, and it didn't take long for Nancy to become enamored with him. During high school, neither one of them had ever really dated anyone, Nancy wanted to focus on her skating and Mike wasn't nearly popular enough to have any girls interested in him.

They married a year and a half after Mike and Nancy moved to Chicago, and Nancy moved in with Jonathan and Mike was left alone. At first, nothing changed with their skating, in fact that same year they went to Nationals and managed to snag a third place finish, but over time, Mike could feel things shift and he knew it was only a matter of time before their time as partners came to an end.

"No matter what happens Mike, you're always going to be my brother." Nancy had said to him when they were on the plane back to Chicago after Nationals, the high of winning a medal starting to fade as they went back to reality, and Nancy's words had only shaken him more. "And I'm always going to be thankful for everything we've accomplished together."

So yeah, Mike had seen this coming. That didn't stop it from hurting like a bitch, though.

“Come on in, Mike.” Joyce’s voice was laced with amusement as she called Mike into her office, her amusement no doubt stemming from the fact that Mike hadn’t knocked on her door. He had merely been pacing outside of it for almost fifteen minutes, trying to figure out how he wanted to approach this conversation.

“Hey Mrs. Byers.” Mike said, hovering awkwardly around the chair across from her desk before sitting down. “I promise I wasn’t like, creeping out in the hallway or anything.”

Joyce laughed softly, shaking her head. “I know you weren’t, trust me, I know exactly what you’re doing here. You think I don’t know that my own son is having a baby.”

Mike gulped, looking down at his hands. He still wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted Joyce to tell him. In a perfect world, she would tell him that she knew someone who could fill in for Nancy, but this was definitely not a perfect world, so he was entering this with zero expectations.

“I guess I just,” He sighed, trying really hard not to sound too desperate, even though he definitely was, “want to know if there’s anything that I can do.”

“Now, I know that this whole situation seems pretty bleak, but, I think I might have a solution. I know that right now everything is going to seem messy, but I don’t think we should give up just yet.” Joyce started pulling papers out of her desk, and Mike’s nerves started dancing across his skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake.

“Your solution isn’t going to be me training by myself is it? Because I haven’t skated by myself in years and I honestly don’t even know what I would do on the ice by myself. I work so much better with a partner and I know that winning and titles and championships aren’t everything but all I’ve wanted since I was a kid was to go to Olympics and I think if I skate by myself I’ll fail and -” Mike was rambling and he knew he was rambling, something he often did when he was nervous, but he cut himself off when he saw a small smirk on Joyce’s face.

"I would never put you in a situation that you didn't feel comfortable with, Mike." Joyce said with an easy smile. "Trust me, I know that every skater has their strengths and things that they're comfortable with and things that they aren't comfortable with. One thing I always try to do here is play to all my skaters strengths."

Mike nodded, liking the way that this conversation was going. He was still nervous, but as long as Joyce's solution wasn't just throwing him out on the ice by himself, everything was going to be okay. Hopefully.

"I think I have a skater who might be the perfect partner for you." The smile on Joyce's face grew. "She's one of our best, and while I know that you and your sister worked so well together, I have a feeling this is going to work out really well."

"Who is it?" Mike asked. He didn't know many of the other skaters who used this rink. He had met a couple of the hockey players who used this rink to practice, but him and Nancy had always practiced at weird hours that he hardly ever encountered the other figure skaters.

Joyce smirked knowingly, which made Mike's stomach flip and his heart begin to speed up. "I was thinking that you and El Hopper would make quite the team."

Mike's stomach dropped.

El Hopper? Really? She was one of the few figure skaters that Mike *did* know, granted he didn't know her very well but he had come across her a couple times. She practiced either before or after him and Nancy on occasion and there was something about her that put Mike on edge and he didn't like it. Therefore, he didn't like her.

Sure, he had never really spoken to her, but there was something about the way she carried herself, like she was better than everyone else that really just bothered him. And he was almost insulted that Joyce wanted them to be partners. Of course, he didn't want Joyce to know that, so he forced a smile and bit his lip nervously.

"Can I ask, why you think that? I thought she was a solo skater." And he did, he had never seen her skating with a partner before, so he

didn't really know exactly what qualified to be considered a good partner for him. By what he had heard about her and what he had seen from her, she didn't seem like the kind of person who wanted to share the spotlight.

"She is, but she, like you, has Olympic dreams. El is extremely talented, but women's figure skating is in such a good place now, it's way harder for individual skaters to get the recognition. You two have similar work ethics and styles, I think you two would work very well together and I know that El would be willing to work in a team if it meant that she could be as successful as you and Nancy were." Joyce said, like it was the simplest thing in the world. And maybe to her it was, but Mike still wasn't convinced.

"I don't know..." Mike said. Joyce was pretty good at seeing through anyone's bullshit, it's what made her such a good coordinator sometimes, so he figured he might as well just be honest.

"You don't have to make any decisions today. Just think about it, okay?" Joyce said, giving Mike a hopeful smile. "I know that this a lot to take in for one day, but I really think that this could work."

Mike nodded, understanding where she was coming from and not really in the mood to argue with her, especially because he knew she really was just trying to help. "Yeah, alright I'll think about it."

This seemed to please Joyce, as she clapped her hands together once, and leaned back in her chair. "Good, I'm glad to hear it. Let's give it until Friday, alright. I know that's still only five days, but we're on a little bit of a time crunch."

"I understand, Friday. I can do that." Mike said, giving Joyce a small smile and standing from his chair. "Thanks, Mrs. Byers."

"Anytime Mike, that's what I'm here for."

Mike gave another small nod, grabbing his bag as Joyce went back to the paperwork she had been doing when Mike had first entered. He stopped however, when he got to the door, a question lingering on his tongue.

“Hey, Mrs. Byers?” She looked up, nodding at him to continue. “Have you asked El if she wants to do this?”

He had to know, the last thing he wanted to do was decide that working with someone like her was worth it and agree to Joyce’s idea, only to have El not agree to do it and laugh in his face for even suggesting that she work with him.

“She’s already agreed to it.”

Yep, Mike was fucking screwed.

Mike’s day really didn’t get much better after that. He didn’t really want to go home, but he really didn’t want to just sit around the ice rink for the rest of the day. So after wallowing in the locker room a little bit after his conversation with Joyce, he left the arena a little bit before the hockey players would be coming in for practice. He really didn’t want to explain to a bunch of beefy dudes why he was sitting in the corner of the locker room by himself.

He settled on wandering around the city, not really going anywhere. It was cold, but not quite winter cold yet, so it wasn’t too bad as he shuffled from street to street, occasionally stopping to look in shop windows, and he spent about twenty minutes wandering around this used book store.

Before long however, his stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn’t eaten anything yet that day. Usually when him and Nancy had early morning practices, they would grab breakfast together, but his whole day felt like he was living in the Twilight Zone and now it was almost two in the afternoon and had never eaten breakfast, or lunch for that matter.

Which is how he find himself entering a small diner on a random side street in the middle of Chicago.

The place was called Benny’s Diner and as soon as Mike walked in, he

was cursing himself for never finding this place before. Sure, figure skaters were supposed to eat relatively healthy, but they still needed to carbo load sometimes, and Mike had been blessed with the ability to pretty much eat whatever he wanted and never gain a pound.

It reminded of diners from those 50s movies Nancy had always forced him to watch as a kid, and it smelled like every single barbecue his parents had ever dragged him too, but a million times better and Mike could feel his mouth physically watering as he approached to counter and ordered a burger.

He thought that his day was finally going to be getting better, until he looked around the diner and saw El Hopper sitting in the corner booth.

Of course, *of fucking course* , she would be here. Because it's not like Mike could get away with not seeing her at all in the next week so he can try and make his decision, no she has to show up here and now.

At first he wants to ignore her, and pretend like he doesn't see her, however, before he can enact such a plan, El looks up from whatever she was looking at in her lap and spots him by the counter. She gives him a small smile and waves, no doubt being able to tell from the look on his face that he's been informed of Joyce's idea.

Swallowing whatever ounce of pride he has in his body, he pulls himself away from the counter and approaches her booth, standing across from her.

"Hi, Mike." She says, her voice softer than Mike had been expecting. He didn't really know what he thought she would sound like, but it's certainly not what comes out of her mouth. "I'm El, and despite the fact that we've been skating at the same rink for over a year, I don't think we've ever officially met."

She sticks her hand out and Mike takes it hesitantly, not really sure what to make of the interaction.

"Yeah, I've seen you around before." He mutters. Wordlessly, she gestures to booth seat opposite her and he sits, letting go of her hand as he does.

"I assume that Joyce talked to you, considering how weird you're acting." She says with a small shrug, taking a bite of the waffle that's on her plate. He crinkles his eyebrows at her choice in meal, but shrugs it off.

"I'm not acting weird." He says, annoyed. "And yeah, she told me." He finds it odd that she refers to Joyce by her first name, which is something that Mike doesn't think he's ever done and he's been skating for her for almost three whole years. "Honestly, I'm a little confused by the whole thing."

Mike swears he sees El roll her eyes, but he can't really tell, as she adjusts herself in the booth at the same time, leaning forward on the table. "Look, I know that I'm an individual, but you're one of the best male skaters in the entire midwest and honestly, probably the entire country and not to toot my own horn, but I'm pretty talented too and I genuinely think we could work really well together."

He has to admire her confidence, that's for sure. "So instead of just trying to get to the Olympics all on your own, you're gonna jump into a partnership that may or may not work just to try and be more successful."

This time she definitely rolls her eyes, which causes him to just become more annoyed. "So what if I am? We're all trying to accomplish the same goal here aren't we, Olympic gold? That's the endgame we're all aiming for. Why does it matter how we get there?"

"I guess I just don't understand why you want to work with me when we've never spoken before." Mike says with a small shrug.

"Because, as I said before, you're talented. And truthfully, it would be a real waste of your talent if you never got to go the Olympics just because your sister had a baby and left you all alone." The comment about Nancy bristles him slightly, but he's not going to argue because she is making a good point. "I'm sitting here, offering you a partner, offering you a chance to get that Olympic gold. You really want to turn me down just because we've never talked before. Although, we are talking right now, so you're wrong there."

"Excuse me for not wanting to jump into a partnership that's pretty

much built on communication and trust with someone I barely know.”

El considers this for a moment, but Mike knows that whatever he says isn't going to sway her. Honestly, at this point, he knows he's just looking for an argument. He's still bitter from his conversation with Nancy that morning and he didn't want to lash out at Joyce, so El is quickly becoming the source of his irritation, despite the fact that she hasn't really done anything wrong. Except annoy the hell out of him.

“Well, I apologize for not being your sister, but most partnerships start with the pair being complete strangers. You sound like you're not even willing to try.”

“Maybe that's exactly what's going on here.”

El groans, and Mike starts to feel kind of bad, so he backs off a little bit, having the decency to look a little ashamed of his words. He doesn't know if she buys it, though.

“Look, why don't I make you a deal.”

Mike raises an eyebrow, “A deal?”

“Yes, a deal.” Pushing aside her plate, El leans forward on the table so her face is closer to his. The intensity of her stare causes his stomach to swoop and he gulps nervously. “I know that Joyce probably gave you some time to think this over, she mentioned something about how you'd probably want some time. Am I right about that?”

“She wants an answer by Friday.” He says with a small nod, surprised by how low his voice comes out. He also realizes that he's drifted closer to El, and their faces are now only inches apart from each other across the table.

“So here's the deal, for the next four days, until Friday, you and I practice together. No coach, no Joyce, no one, just you and me. If it's awful, we don't have to work together, you can move on and try and find another partner and I'll go back to being an individual. But, if by

the end of the week, we've managed to not kill or hate each other, we stay partners, officially."

Mike considers this, he has to admit, he's not a bad idea. He was kind of hoping he would be able to make this decision without actually talking to El, but now, he's starting to think that maybe this is the best option. Hell, it's only four days, right?

"Alright, deal."

El smiles, leaning back in her seat. "Wonderful. So, tomorrow, let's meet at the rink, nine am."

Mike barely has the opportunity to nod before El is standing from the table, giving him a wry smile before she picks up her bag and walks away from him, disappearing into the back of the diner.

Leaving Mike with nothing but her empty plate and the lingering thought that she is much prettier up close than he would have thought she was.

This was definitely not going to end well.

Notes for the Chapter:

alright so there's chapter one. i know it was focused a lot of mike but i wanted to kind of introduce his history and the next chapter will focus more on el and what her story is. then we'll get into the meat of the story which is these two trying to work together.

i promise that the rest of the party (along with steve and hopper) will be making appearances in later chapters. i have plans for all of them and chances are lumax and jopper will be pretty prominent later on. jancy will be around too but not as prominently.

anyways!! i hope you guys enjoyed this and hopefully you want to see more? so lemme know what you think! thanks y'all, until next time! feel free to hit me up on my tumblr (janehoppers) if you wanna talk that way, i'm always up for talking about

my kids.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

hello!!! i wanna start off by saying thank you so much to all the people who left comments on the first chapter, they made me super happy and i'm glad people are actually interested in this, so thank you!! i also wanna just apologize for this taking this long, i meant to update it monday, but it took a while to crank out, so hopefully y'all can forgive me. from now on i'm gonna aim for updating every saturday/sunday (depending on when chapter's get done), considering i just got a job, weekends work better for me in terms of updating.

anyways, this chapter is a little longer than chapter one and we get to meet some more characters, so hopefully y'all enjoy that. unfortunately, there's like zero mike and el interaction, but the next chapter is going to be like...entirely mike and el so hopefully that makes up for it.

El's day started the way that all of her days started.

She woke up at six am, her alarm beeping softly through the early morning light of her bedroom, sighing slightly as she stretched her arms over her head. She didn't really have any reason to be up this early on this particular day, her rink reservation wasn't until later that afternoon, but she enjoyed getting up early in the morning. There was something peaceful about waking up with the rest of the world.

Throwing on a pair of leggings and a sweater, she quickly brushed her teeth before exiting the bathroom and entering the kitchen, smiling when she caught sight of her roommate pouring coffee into one of two travel mugs sitting on the counter.

"Morning, sunshine." Max said with a smirk as she handed El one of the mugs. "I almost didn't expect you to be up this early, I thought

your reservation wasn't until later."

El sighed as she pulled open the cupboard, grabbing a granola bar before snatching a banana from the bowl on the table. "It's not, but I figure a little conditioning this morning wouldn't hurt. Besides if I don't get out of the house now, I'll never leave."

Max snorted as she took a sip of her coffee, visibly cringing as she did. El didn't understand why she always drank it black if she hated it so much.

"Amen to that, unfortunately, I am not in the same boat today. Coach is making us do training in the park today. We're hockey players, I don't understand why running around in a park in the middle of winter at seven in the morning is going to improve my playing."

"Maybe she's trying to get you guys to bond." El noted, raising her eyebrows. Max merely glared at her in response, sighing as she pushed herself away from the counter.

"Alright, I'm out of here. I don't know when I'll be home tonight, I have a date. So don't wait up okay?"

"You finally say yes to that guy who's been flirting with you for weeks?" El teased. Max had been 'complaining' (re: nearly gushing) about a hockey player on the male team had been flirting with her for weeks, she had refused to tell El who it was, not that El knew who any of the male hockey players were regardless, but El knew that Max was totally smitten even if she didn't want to admit it.

"That's a secret I'll never tell." Max said, another smirk falling onto her face as she pulled her jacket out, rushing out the door without another word. El could only laugh, falling back against the kitchen counter and taking another sip of her coffee.

When El had first moved to the Chicago about a year ago to join Joyce's rink, she had been terrified of the prospect of living with a roommate. Being an only child with a single dad meant that for most of her life, her dad was the only person she had ever shared a living space with. She had been more than nervous that living with someone her own age would be the worst thing, but luckily living

with Max was pretty much the complete opposite.

They didn't have much in common, but they ran on similar schedules and knew each other's habits. She was also one of the few girls that El had ever really gotten along with, so needless to say when they had realized about two weeks after they had met that they both were looking for roommates, it all seemed to make perfect sense.

Now, she had absolutely nothing to complain about, and as El looked over at the front door where Max had just disappeared from, it looked like it would continue to stay that way.

About forty five minutes later El was making her way into the rink, ready to head to the gym and do some conditioning before maybe talking to Joyce about changing up her practice schedule when the first sign that something about today was going to be different than any other day.

And that was Nancy Wheeler standing in the lobby.

El had always liked Nancy, she was nice enough, and always said hi to El if they ended up in the locker room at the same time. Sure, they weren't friends by any means, but El certainly preferred her to her brother, who always seemed to look the other way whenever he saw El.

The reason that this particular sight was odd, was because El was almost one hundred percent certain that Nancy was supposed to be on the ice right now. No, she was definitely one hundred percent certain, she had checked the ice schedule before she had left the night before and Nancy and her brother were definitely supposed to be skating right about now.

"Oh, hi El." Nancy said after a moment, catching sight of El, who was in the middle of trying to figure out what to do. El smiled, her grip on her bag tightening. Nancy sounded upset and El didn't do well

with dealing with other people's sadness.

"Hi, Nancy." She said with a tight smile. "How are you?"

Nancy sighed, and El could hear the wobble in her breath. "I'm..." There were tears gathering in the corner of her eyes and El swallowed uncomfortably. "I'm alright, I just had to deliver some tough news, it's not important."

El nods, not really sure how to respond to that. She wonders if Nancy is looking for someone to comfort her, or is just looking for someone to vent to. If she just needs someone to vent to, El's pretty good at that, she plays that role often with Max, but she doesn't know if she'd have the right words to say if Nancy is looking for advice. Fortunately, or possibly unfortunately, El doesn't have time to come up with a response before Nancy is talking again.

"I'm pregnant."

If El wasn't giving Nancy her full attention before, she certainly was now. That was definitely *not* what she had expected to come from the other girl's mouth and it was hard to tell by the way Nancy's voice cracked if it was something to be excited about or not.

"Oh." Was all El could manage to say. She had no idea what Nancy was looking for from her, so she figured the less she said was probably the better.

"Yeah."

It was then that it all clicked together in El's mind. Nancy was pregnant. She just had to deliver some tough news. She had heard rumors around the rink that Nancy wasn't planning on skating for much longer, her marriage and desire to pursue a journalism career making her less enthusiastic about the sport. So, with this development in her life, all the pieces fell together for El.

Nancy was done with skating and Mike was completely partnerless.

Now *that* was certainly a game changer this morning. While El wasn't close with either Wheeler sibling, she had seen them on the ice before and they were like nothing she had ever seen before. They

were the darlings of Joyce's rink, being nationally ranked and favored for Olympic gold (which, despite her best efforts, El wasn't even close to), so to imagine them not skating together was something El had trouble wrapping her mind around.

"Well, I should get going." Nancy said after a couple moments of silence, honestly El had kind of forgotten they were having some semblance of a conversation, her mind too focused on wrapping her head around Nancy not skating anymore. "I'll see you around, El. Good luck."

"Thanks, you too." El said, smiling at Nancy's kindness. She waved slightly at the older girl, watching as Nancy disappeared through the front doors, the metal slamming behind her.

Turning on her heels, El made her way to the door of the rink, peeking through the glass of the window. She could see Mike from her position, he was hunched over in a seat, his legs jiggling and despite the lack of relationship of any sorts between them, she felt bad. She couldn't imagine just walking into practice one day and having all that dumped on you without any warning, especially from your sister of all people.

It was then, that an idea came to form in her head. An idea that could end very badly, but if done well it could give her the chance at the dream she had always strived to achieve.

So with a smirk on her face and a newfound determination in her step, El held her head up high and turned away from the gym and set off to set her plan into action.

El didn't have many friends around the rink, and part of the reason for that was her connection to Joyce Byers.

Joyce was an old high school friend of her dads (at least according to him they had only ever been friends, El thought otherwise due to the

wistful smile that overtook his face whenever he talked about her, or the twinkle in his eye that made an appearance when he happened to be visiting her in the city and ran into Joyce at the rink, but she digresses), so when El expressed an interest in pursuing figure skating as more than just a sport to keep her busy in their small hometown, her dad made a phone call to Joyce to get El off on the right foot.

When word came out to all the other skaters that El had essentially gotten in because of her dad's connection to Joyce, they began to resent her. While most of the time, El was able to cope with the fact that she wasn't very popular, she hated the fact that the reason all the other girls refused to look at her in the locker room wasn't even true.

While it was true that her dad had called Joyce and set up a meeting for El, she still had to prove herself a worthy member of Joyce's team, and her was her talent that had gotten her here, not whatever weird lingering relationship existed between her father and Joyce.

(She had always appreciated that Nancy Wheeler never listened to those rumors and always treated El with kindness, but El couldn't help but wonder if the reason Mike seemed to resent her was because he *did* believe them.)

However, today El was going to use the connection she had with Joyce to her advantage.

"Morning, Joyce." El chirped brightly as she stepped into Joyce's office, smiling at the woman behind the desk.

"Good morning El, I didn't expect to see you here so early."

El's lips quirk slightly and she takes the seat across from Joyce's desk, immediately feeling more calm, Joyce's motherly energy flooding her senses.

"Yeah, my reservation isn't until later but I wanted to come and use the gym for a little while." Joyce nodded, a knowing smile coming onto her face.

"Well, I'm happy to hear that you're putting in the extra work." Joyce

notes with a raise of her eyebrow. “Why do I have a feeling that there’s another reason you’re popping into my office at oh, eight thirty in the morning then to just say hi?”

El bites her lip, suddenly embarrassed. Her idea definitely wasn’t a bad one and she didn’t necessarily think that Joyce would flat out say no, but now that she was sitting in front of her, her stomach was doing weird nervous flips.

“I ran into Nancy on my way in.” El says, like that’s any kind of explanation.

“Ah, I’m assuming that means she told you the good news.” Joyce says with a smile, and El can’t help but smile too, remembering that Nancy’s news means that Joyce is going to be a grandmother. For a moment, El is caught up in imagining Joyce standing by the side of the rink, cheering El on with a baby in her arms before she’s snapped out of it by Joyce’s voice. “But I still don’t think congratulations is the reason you’re here either.”

El sighs, deciding to just take the leap. “I wanna be Mike’s new partner.”

Whatever Joyce had been expecting El to say, El has a feeling that this wasn’t quite it, because she leans back in her chair, her eyes wide with surprise. El feels her face heat up in embarrassment, the moments of silence between the moving slowly and painfully.

“Huh.” El can tell she’s considering this, wondering how to move forward. “I didn’t know you had any interest in pair skating, El. Or that you and Mike were such close friends that you’d feel comfortable skating with him.”

“Oh well, I don’t really and I’m not so much.” El says, and this seems to confuse Joyce even more and El certainly can’t blame her. Not only had El just said that she wanted to be a partner to a skater who had just stopped working with his old partner about fifteen minutes earlier, but she was also saying that she had no real interest in doing it and hardly knew the person she was suggesting doing it with.

So yeah, Joyce’s confusion made a lot of sense.

“I think I’m going to need a little more convincing, sweetheart.”

“That’s fair, yeah.” El said, shifting in her seat, leaning closer to Joyce’s desk. She couldn’t help but feel warm at Joyce’s term of endearment, forever grateful that Joyce had taken her under her wing when she moved to Chicago.

There was a beat of silence as El struggled to put her idea into words, before it all came stumbling out of her mouth like the fall she had taken during her senior year of high school when she broke her ankle during practice.

“All I’ve wanted for my entire life was to win a gold medal. And I know, everyone who comes through here says that, but it’s all I’ve ever wanted. I’ve worked for it, I’ve worked my ass off for it and while I know I have a chance of making the Olympic team, but the Russians? They’re on another level, I have no chance at beating them. And for some people, the experience of the Olympics might be enough but it’s not for me.

Mike, he does have a chance. I’ve seen him and Nancy together, they had a real shot at winning, and now that she’s gone, I think I might be able to replace her. I’m good, I know I’m good, and I think if Mike and I work together, we could do this. Just give me a chance.”

El’s out of breath when she finishes her explanation, her face hot and knuckles white from clenching them. Joyce is silent, absorbing El’s words before she nods slowly.

“El, sweetie.”

She sighs, she can feel the disagreement from Joyce in the air and she’s already preparing an argument. But Joyce reaches across her desk and takes El’s hands in her own, squeezing them lightly.

“I’m not saying no, before you try and argue with me.” El can’t help but smile slightly at that, a small snort escaping her nose. “But, I can’t just agree to this without talking to Mike first.”

Well, El supposes she can’t argue with that. She’s definitely not Mike Wheeler’s biggest fan, truthfully she thought she was a little stuck up

considering he never talked to anyone except his sister and avoiding looking at her whenever they happened to pass each other at the rink even though El had never spoken to him before. But, she couldn't say he didn't deserve to have a say in who he skates with.

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

Joyce smiles at her, a twinkle of pride in her eye and it makes El's heart soar. There's a really special feeling that comes along with Joyce Byers being proud of you.

"It's a good idea, El, and I'm proud of you for going out of your comfort zone and being willing to try something new. You have such a strong sense of determination that I know you'll get to where you want to go."

El blushes with embarrassment, rolling her eyes. "Thanks."

"I don't know how long it's going to take for Mike to feel comfortable thinking about skating with someone else. Him and Nancy were partners for so long, their whole lives, but I'll talk to him. He might not agree to it, but I'll talk to him."

She smiles. She can work with that.

"Thank you, Joyce."

Joyce smiles, releasing El's hands with a tap and a small squeeze. "But, I don't want you to stop your training. This might all fall through and I don't want you falling behind in that case."

El rolls her eyes and nods. "Of course, I think I would go crazy if I wasn't skating."

"That's my girl."

El shares a smile with the older woman, feeling optimistic about what was to come. And she supposed that was enough for now. Standing from her seat, El grabbed her stuff, looking over her shoulder at the empty rink.

"Hey, since Mike and Nancy aren't going to be using the ice, can I

hope on and take their reservation time?" El asks, a hopeful smile on her face. Joyce smirks.

"Of course, like I would ever say no to something like that. Just make sure you're off the ice by eleven, that's when the hockey players start and you know how they get when someone is on the ice when it's their turn."

El giggles, throwing Joyce a wave before exiting the office and making her way to the ice. She knows that it's still early, and Joyce hasn't even talked to Mike, but she has a good feeling.

Today might be weird, but maybe that's a good thing.

El has always felt the most at home on the ice.

Spending her first twelve years in foster care, including a particular long experience in the care of a man she would rather forget, it took her a long time to find a place to call home. Hopper certainly helped, when he took her in and called her his own. That's the first time she really felt like she knew what home felt like it.

But that was nothing compared to when she first stepped onto the ice.

She started skating later than a lot of her peers. She didn't start until she was almost thirteen, encouraged by Hopper to join some kind of club or sport in order to interact with other kids her own age, since she didn't attend public school, and she picked figure skating after watching a competition on television and immediately engrossed by the magic of it all.

The minute she put her skate to the ice she was in love. Her teacher was amazed that she had never skated before, her natural talent shining through and her attention to detail something to marvel at. She was able to spin and jump like she was born to do it and it was the most exhilarating feeling in the entire world.

She had always loved, and been inspired by the Olympics, it was one of the few things she had been allowed to watch in Brenner's house, him determined to have her inspired by greatness so she would achieve it herself, so a gold medal had always been a far away dream. Of course, every child dreams of winning a gold medal, but it wasn't until El was a teenager that she realized that she could win one someday.

At fourteen she won her first competition, sure it was local, just Indianapolis and the surrounding towns, but she got her own trophy and flowers and Hopper enthusiastically took a million pictures of her and bragged to anyone who would listen about how his kid was a winner. If there was anything that came close to how exhilarating it felt to jump, it was standing on the top of the podium.

So she continued to work her ass off so she could continue to win.

And she did.

When she was sixteen, she won the title of state champion in the state of Indiana. When she was seventeen, she was named skater of the year under the age of eighteen in the midwest.

But when she was eighteen, she broke her ankle in the first week of the season and was out for ten weeks. It was worst thing that had happened to her since moving in with Hopper.

El had always prided herself at being able to get back up after getting knocked down, hell she had down it a million times in practice, but it took her a long time to bounce back from that. She spent weeks laying around the house, so much so that Hopper feared that something else was going on.

She did bounce back though, and because she didn't really feel comfortable going to college, having never attended regular school and afraid that it would be too much, she was able to throw herself into training. Her dad worried about her sometimes, giving her more than one pep talk about how she didn't need to devote her entire life to training and that she should take breaks. It was one of the main reasons he had insisted on sending her to Joyce when she was twenty two, he knew Joyce would take care of her.

(El would have been more annoyed about Hopper's overprotectiveness, but she knew how he lost his first daughter and how hard it had been for him to see how she had lived with Brenner. So, she knew he was being worried.)

After her setback, El knew it was going to take her some time and a lot of work to put her back on the top of the podium, especially if she wanted that podium to be an Olympic one.

Moving out to Chicago and joining Joyce's rink was the best decision El had ever made. Sure, every day the possibility of getting an individual Olympic medal was looking a little bleaker (she really needed to stop watching videos of the Russian and Canadian skaters before bed), but she was in better form than she had ever been.

But maybe all hope was not lost. Now an Olympic medal was within her reach, and she could be on the podium on the biggest sports stage in the entire world.

She would just have Mike Wheeler by her side, and she could live with that.

While El was typically hyper focused during her practice times, today she was distracted. As good as she felt about her conversation with Joyce earlier, she was nervous about what the outcome would be of her conversation with Mike.

About halfway through the run of her program, she spotting the man of the hour himself exiting the locker room. She didn't know what he was still doing here, when she had gotten onto the ice about forty five minutes ago he had disappeared, but he looked forlorn and sad, almost.

The sight did a weird thing to her heart, and she shivered. He didn't spot her, but she could see the crestfallen look on his face and the way his shoulders were slumped as he stood absentmindedly in the

lobby for a couple of minutes before disappearing through the double doors at the front of the building.

She left the ice five minutes later.

Determined to keep herself in better spirits, she left the rink and immediately made her way to her favorite place in the city. She definitely didn't feel guilty about asking Joyce to let her partner up with Mike, but she certainly felt bad for the guy. Damn, she could only imagine how awkward the Wheeler family Thanksgivings were going to be now. She could only hope that Mike's sadness and potential anger for the situation at hand wouldn't cause him to shut down her proposition.

Walking briskly through the city, she smiled when she spotted the familiar diner that reminded her of her home back in Indianapolis with Hopper.

Slipping through the back door of Benny's she smiled at the namesake of the diner himself who was preparing a burger on the grill.

"Well, hello there Miss El." He said with a wide grin when he spotted her. El had always loved Benny, he reminded her of her dad, but more teddy bear like and with less hair on his head. It was no wonder that Benny was Hopper's best friend in high school, another reason that Hopper hadn't been as nervous about sending El off to live in the big city by herself.

"I have friends on every corner of this city, so I'll know if anything happens to you, but I'll also find out if you cause any trouble, alright kid?" He had said when he dropped her off fourteen months ago.

"Haha, very funny."

"You think I'm kidding, but I'm not."

Benny had called her three days later offering her a free meal at his diner. Now, he still let her eat there for free, as long as she repaid him by coming to his apartment for dinner every other weekend. Which was definitely a deal that she could uphold.

“Hey, Benny.” She said, the events of that morning catching up to her and bringing a tint of exhaustion to her voice.

“Long morning at the rink?” He asked, and she nodded, stretching her arms above her head and letting a yawn escape. “Alright, well go sit down out there somewhere, kid and I’ll bring you your usual.”

El smiled, walking over to him and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, kid.” Benny said with a laugh, shaking his head, almost as if it was unheard of that she would need to thank him, and maybe that’s how he truly felt but El would be forever grateful. “Go sit down.”

Exiting the kitchen, El waved at a couple members of the waitstaff before sitting in her usual booth in the back of the diner by the windows. For the next thirty minutes as she ate her waffle and read the latest book she was reading, Mike Wheeler was the last thing on her mind.

Until he walked right into the diner.

Her eyes found him immediately, almost as if her body was anticipating him being here. Unfortunately, he felt her eyes on him and turned to face her, looking both confused and annoyed, which bristled her.

It wasn’t until he walked over and sat down at her table and that she realized that her plan might have a couple of flaws.

The major one being that Mike Wheeler was far more attractive up close in person than she thought he would be.

She was one hundred percent screwed.

Later that night, following her conversation with Mike and a

particularly long conversation full of encouragement with Will, Joyce's son and one of the few friends El had managed to make since moving to here, El found herself sitting on the couch and watching reruns of *Friends* .

"What are you still doing awake?" Max asked as soon as she opened the door to the apartment and saw the El was still up. "I thought I told you not to wait up." Glancing up at the clock on the wall, El smirked when she saw it was almost one in the morning, causing Max to roll her eyes. "Don't look at me like that, nothing happened."

"I never said it did." El remarked, turning the tv off and directing her full attention to her roommate. "And I wasn't waiting up, I just couldn't sleep."

"Nightmares?" Max asked softly, taking a seat next to her on the couch.

"No, just nervous." El said with a small shrug. "Do you know Mike Wheeler?" She knew it was a long shot for Max to know him, despite Max's team using the rink for practices, Max really only knew other hockey players, in fact El was almost certain that she was the only figure skater Max associating with, but it didn't hurt to ask.

Max thought for a couple seconds and they were the longest couple seconds of El's life. "No, I don't think so, he's the one that skates with his sister right?"

El nodded, sighing softly. "Yeah." She didn't elaborate, unsure of how to talk about this with Max. Not that she thought Max wouldn't understand, or be able to help her, but it was kind of a weird situation and El wasn't sure she wanted to share it with anyone until the week was up. Because there was a very good chance that things could go very wrong.

"Why?" Max asked. "Do you think he's like cute or something? Does El have a crush on the cute figure skater man?" El groaned, throwing her face in hands while Max laughed. The answer was yes El did think he was cute, but she definitely did not have a crush on him, he was obnoxious and had basically confirmed to her today that he found her annoying, so no, definitely no crush.

“No, I definitely do not have a crush on him.” Max nodded, but didn’t look like she believed her. “Never mind, just forget I asked.”

“I’m not going to forget because something is clearly happening here, but I’ll drop it for now, but know that I will be asking more questions later.”

“Oh trust me, I know you will be.”

Max smirked, grabbing the glass of wine that El had been drinking off the table and taking a sip of it.

“So, how was your date?” El asked with a waggle of her eyebrows, happy for the shift in attention from her to Max.

“It was alright.” Max said with a simple shrug. El knew she was trying to act nonchalant, but there was a red tint to her cheeks that El couldn’t help but smile at.

“Are you going to see him again?”

“Maybe.” Max said, shoving El playfully. “What’s with the twenty questions?”

“Just interested, that’s all.”

“Well, leave it alone alright. If I’m not allowed to ask questions about whatever is going on between you and Mike Wheeler, then you aren’t allowed to ask me about my date, deal?”

“There’s nothing going on between me and Mike.” El said with a snort, causing Max to laugh.

“Whatever you say, I’m going to bed.”

With that Max got up off the couch, taking El’s wine with her and disappearing into her bedroom, closing the door with a definitive click.

“Goodnight, Max!”

“Fuck off, El!”

El laughed, shaking her head. While talking with Max, and seeing her blush about her date, had lifted El's spirits, the nerves were still very much present, even as she climbed into bed twenty minutes later.

Closing her eyes, El willed for sleep to come to her, even as she imagined all the ways that tomorrow could go very very wrong.

Oh yes, this was definitely not going to end well.

Notes for the Chapter:

hope you enjoyed this!! i debated a lot on whether or not i wanted hopper to be el's biological dad or adoptive but then i reasoned that the whole found family aspect of their relationship is what i love most about it, so i settled for adoptive. brenner isn't really going to be any kind of issue here, and i probably won't go too in depth on el's past with him, but i'm sure it'll come up later.

but yay! hopper, max and will are all characters now (less so will, but he's there), hopefully next chapter i'll get into dustin and lucas but i promise that they're coming.

anyways, thanks y'all so much for reading. comment and lemme know what you think, also feel free to hit my up on my tumblr, janehoppers.tumblr.com, if you wanna. i love talking, so. but yeah, lemme know your thoughts and hopefully i'll be around next week with a new chapter!

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

ok hi. so i know i said i was gonna update this like a month(?) or so ago, but i ended up having major writer's block and just generally couldn't get it done so that's why it's taken so long BUT i finally managed to get something out that i'm happy with. i hope that the fact that this chapter is pretty much all mike/el interactions will make up for the fact that it took so long to get out.

warnings for mike's potty mouth continue through this chapter. enjoy!

When Mike woke up the next morning, he had almost forgotten about what had happened the day before.

He was about to push himself out of bed to go through his usual routine to make it to the rink on time, when the memories of his conversation with Nancy, and his subsequent conversations with Mrs. Byers and El, all came flooding back to him. He groaned as he threw his head back on the pillow, suddenly much less enthused to be getting out of bed that morning.

Not that he was ever particularly *excited* about waking up at the break of dawn, but it was still much more exciting when it was his sister waiting for him at the rink, not an annoying stuck up girl who he had had one conversation with.

Either way, he knew that there was nothing he could do about his predicament, he had made a deal with El, and even though he was dreading the next four days, he wasn't the kind of guy who broke his word. Besides, chances are they would practice for four days, it would go horribly wrong and then Mike would never have to talk to her again if he didn't want to.

After about twenty minutes of sulking in bed, Mike finally began to make his way out of bed and get ready for the day. He moved slower

than usual, taking extra time to actually make himself something to eat for breakfast instead of just drinking coffee, and allowing himself to relax in his pajamas for a little while before finally getting dressed in his normal practice clothes.

As he dressed and readied himself for the day, he allowed his mind to wander, particularly on his new “partner.” (Because she was not ever going to be his actual partner, no.) He didn’t know exactly what it was about her that bothered him so much, there was just something about her that got under his skin.

It definitely *wasn’t* that fact that she had wide, light, brown eyes that had reflected the sun through the window of the diner. It wasn’t her curly hair that fell gracefully against her shoulders that looked softer than his mother’s nicest blankets. And it definitely wasn’t the cute way her eyebrows quirked and her smile twitched when she knew she was getting under his skin. Nope, it was none of those things at all.

“*Damn her.*” Was the last thought on his mind as he pushed himself out of his apartment five minutes after nine, already late to their first practice together.

He finally stumbled through the front door of the rink fifteen minutes later, cursing himself for being late because he was too busy thinking of her, angry enough that she was consuming his thoughts in *any* kind of way at all. The chill of the air hit him harder than it usually did, sending a deep shiver up his spine and the cold resting in his bones in a way that it never had before. For the first time that day, he started to feel nervous, he had never skated with a partner that wasn’t his sister before, and now that he was here and it was about to happen, he kind of felt like vomiting, regretting his choice of eating breakfast that morning.

Taking a glance at the clock hanging in the lobby, he sighed when he noticed that he was ten minutes late. El probably thought he had

ditched her and he had half a mind to turn around and actually leave. For all he knew she wasn't here anymore, she could have left the minute nine o'clock came and left and he wasn't there.

He doubted he was that lucky, though.

Pushing through the doors that separated the rink from the lobby a groan left his lips when he spotted El on the corner of the ice, spinning in slow circles. He couldn't tell, at first, what she was doing, entertaining herself until he showed up, maybe. She seemed to be in her own little world, she hadn't even flinch when the heavy rink door was slammed shut behind him. He stood there, watching her.

It occurred to him in that moment, that as many times as he had walked by the rink when she was practicing he had never actually *seen* her skate. Sure, he knew her reputation and he had seen her doing twirls around the ice from a distance on more than one occasion, but this was the first time he was seeing her first hand.

El seemed to have decided to practice her jumps, moving away from the wall and closer to the center. As she glided on the ice, he took a step forward, half wanting to interrupt her because they sooner they got started, the sooner they could be done, and half wanting to stand there and watch her. No matter how annoying he found her, he couldn't deny that she was memorizing to watch.

It was almost impossible not to be entranced by the way she circled around the ice and launched herself into the air. She was small, smaller than Nancy that was for sure, so it looked like it was nothing for her to fly through the way that she did. Mike didn't think he had ever seen someone get that much height, at least not in person.

When she landed, her leg barely wobbled and he could see the small grin of satisfaction cross her face, a smile involuntarily crossing his own face as well, before he was brought back to reality like a deflating balloon.

"Oh, hey." She said, noticing him standing there. The grin was still on her face and she made her way over to him, leaning her arms against the barricade of the rink once she was in front of him. "How long have you been standing there?"

He shrugged, taking a small step forward. "Not that long." She nodded, and there was an awkward beat of silence that followed. "Sorry I'm late."

El looked confused, her eyebrows crinkled together and her eyes looking around and squinting when they found the clock. "Huh." She muttered, mainly to herself then to him. "I didn't even notice."

"You didn't notice that I was almost fifteen minutes late?"

"No, besides I figured you would show up eventually." El said, shrugging her shoulders like it was the simplest thing in the world.

A voice in the back of Mike's head was telling him to not say anything in return, to just drop the conversation and put his skates on so they could get started but there was something about the way El was talking that was itching at him.

"What? You didn't think there was a slightest chance that I wouldn't show up? That you would realize you spent this entire time waiting for me and I would never come?" That voice in the back of Mike's head was getting louder, practically yelling at him to shut up and he knew he was being a dick but this whole situation was annoying him and El certainly wasn't helping.

"Well, we made a deal and I don't know about you but where I come from, I don't back out on deals and I don't break promises." El said, her voice significantly quieter then it had been a couple minutes ago, but her tone still steady and strong.

None of that stopped Mike though, including her words which bit at something deep within him. He barreled right through sarcastic and straight to irritated, and as he would come to regret, cruel.

"In that case, maybe I'm completely different from you, maybe I don't care about any of that." El's eyes turned cold in front of him, and her face stony. "Maybe I came here to tell you that I have absolutely no interest in skating with someone like you and this whole idea was stupid and it was a mistake for me to agree to it in the first place."

The minute Mike's words tumbled out of his mouth, he wished he

had never said them. El's shoulders straightened, her arms coming across her chest, almost protectively. Mike thought he saw tears in the corner of her eyes, which made him feel like an even bigger asshole than he had felt like just a couple minutes ago. But before he could begin to form any kind of apology, El was letting out a large breath before responding.

"Look, I know that you're angry and irritated and annoyed by everything that's happened in the last twenty four hours and you don't feel like you can be mad at your sister because she's your sister and she's having a baby which is great, but that doesn't mean that you get to take it out on me. I know I might have overstepped a little bit when I suggested we be partners, but I don't think that warrants you being allowed to be some kind of mouthbreather."

Mike had to take a moment to squint his eyebrows in confusion at the term "mouthbreather" which he could only assume was kind of insult, but before he could consider it much longer, El was speaking again.

"If you really don't want to even try and do this, then fine, we won't. I just thought that maybe it could work and I was trying to help. I know I'm probably not your first choice for a partner, or maybe I'm not even your second, third, fourth or fifth, but I thought maybe, just maybe, it could still work. But if you really don't want to be here, then you can just leave because I'm not gonna show up every day for the next week just so I can practice with someone who doesn't even want to be here in the first place."

He couldn't help but feel like he had been punched in the gut hearing her words. While she did annoy him, and the way she had commandeered their potential partnership had took him completely off guard, he knew that it was unfair to take out all of his frustrations on her.

"And if you'd rather not skate with 'someone like me,'" he flinched at his own words being repeated by her, her voice shaking slightly, and Mike couldn't tell if it was with anger or sadness or some combination of both, "then you shouldn't have even agreed to try and be partners with me in the first place."

There was a deafening silence that followed her words and Mike looked down, shifting back and forth on the soles of his feet. El was right, which he kind of hated to admit, but he also knew that he didn't need to be so sour towards her. Because yeah, as irritated and angry as he was, hardly any of it was directed at El personally.

He couldn't be mad at his sister, she was his *sister* for crying out loud, and all things considered she hadn't really done anything wrong. Sure, it was her actions that had led him to being in this position, but he couldn't hold a grudge against her for wanting to start a family, especially when he had been expecting it, he had just been in denial. He also knew that he couldn't be mad at Mrs. Byers, who also hadn't done anything wrong, merely steered him in the direction of being partners with El, which on paper from her perspective probably seemed like a great idea.

That left El. El, who *was* just trying to help, even if she was helping herself as much as she was helping him, but it's not like Mike could say he didn't understand why. She had said so herself, they both had the same endgame they wanted to reach, so it was silly that they weren't trying to help each other.

After a couple of minutes of silence, El gave a large sigh and pushed herself away from the barricade. As he watched her skate away from him, seemingly to gather her stuff, he took a step forward.

"El, wait." She stopped, turning around. Her eyes were red and Mike's heart sunk. *Fuck*, he had never meant to make her cry. Now he felt like absolute shit.

Mike sighed, trying to figure out how to put his words together. He eyes glanced up at the ceiling before looking back at El, who had her eyebrow raised in anticipation.

"I'm sorry, you're right, just because I'm pissed off about all the shit that's happened doesn't mean I should take it out on you." He let out a puff of air, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I have this thing where whenever I get super frustrated I take it out on the nearest person, but I couldn't take it out on Nancy because I didn't want to make her feel bad and I couldn't take it out on Mrs. Byers because I didn't want to get benched or kicked out or anything, so that kind of

left you in the disaster zone.”

El smirked, a small laugh escaping her lips. Mike wasn't entirely sure what El could be laughing at, but he supposed he'd rather have her laughing at him than being angry. He didn't know why he suddenly cared about what El thought of him, but he knew he didn't want her to be angry with him.

“It's okay, Mike.” She said, giving him a small smile. “Don't worry about it.” She spun around on her skate again, continuing her way back over to where her stuff was resting on the bleachers. Mike crinkled her eyebrows together before he realized that she didn't completely understand what he was saying.

Taking a step onto the ice, he took a couple hesitant steps towards her. As much as skating was completely second nature to him by now, he still hadn't quite mastered walking on ice in his regular shoes. She must have heard him because she turned around again, confusion written all over her face.

“What are you doing?” She asked after a moment, her eyebrows raised. “I accepted your apology Mike, it's fine. I get it. No hard feelings.”

“Except you don't get it.” Mike grimaced, that was not the way he had meant to say that and based on the slightly offended look that crossed El's face, she didn't appreciate it. “That's not what I meant.”

“I'm confused.” She said with a shake of her head.

“Understandable, I'm a walking disaster sometimes.” She laughed at that and Mike smiled slightly. “What I meant was that, I am sorry, sorry that I completely wrote you off before I gave you a real chance. You're right, you're trying and help and I showed my appreciation for your help but yelling at you and being an asshole. So, I completely understand if you laugh in my face for this and leave me standing here in the middle of the ice, but I still wanna try this whole being partners thing.”

Over the course of the next thirty seconds, El's face covered a wide range of emotions and Mike almost laughed at how comically fast her

face went from confused to surprise to happiness, a wide smile on her lips. However, almost as quickly as there was a smile, it disappeared, determination settling in moments later.

“Well, now that we’ve lost almost twenty five minutes of practice time, let’s get to work.”

Grabbing Mike’s arm, El dragged him over to where her stuff was resting, only giving him the exact amount of time he needed to lace up his skates before she was practically pushing him out onto the ice. Mike would have been more impressed with her strength if he didn’t nearly lose his footing underneath him, almost falling flat on his face and taking her down him him.

“You alright?” She asked, her hand looped under his arm. Mike had to think it must have been a comical sight if someone were to see them, Mike at almost six foot one being held up by a girl who couldn’t have been taller than five feet.

Mike cleared his throat, partly out of embarrassment and partly out of discomfort. He didn’t know if he was quite comfortable enough yet for them to be touching, even if it was just her hand she was saving him from ending up face down, ass up on the ice. El seemed to read his emotions though, letting go of his arm once he was in a sturdy standing position.

“Let’s get started, yeah?” He asked.

“Yes, let’s. I like the way you think.” And with that, she gave him a smile and starting a lap around the ice, Mike following her like a trail after a comet. Unaware of how much of a magnetic pull she seemed to have on him until they were nearly halfway around the rink.

This was going to be a long week.

Despite her initial pushiness, El was pretty subdued for the rest of practice.

He ended up leading most of the different things they tried, mainly because El didn't actually know many pair skating moves. She seemed happy enough to let him lead them, never expressing any complaints or questioning why he was making her do something, which he was grateful for.

They didn't try anything too extreme for their first practice, mainly trying to see how in sync they could be together. Mike knew all too well that points would be deducted by the handful if they were moving at different speeds. Luckily, it wasn't a complete disaster and while Mike was pretty sure they both knew that there was still a lot of work that needed to be done, it was a good start.

All and all, Mike had to admit that the practice was far from a total disaster.

El was a pretty solid partner, sure, she didn't really know *how* to skate with a partner, but she certainly knew how to skate, that was for sure. When they were finishing up, she did a couple laps around the rink on her own, spinning and jumping into the air as she went.

"I'm scared that if I don't practice them at least once a day that I'll wake up one morning and not know how to do them." She had said as she was shouldering her bag, not letting him give a response before disappearing off the ice and into the locker room.

Mike was still thinking about their practice as he finished up getting out of his skating clothes and into his street clothes. They had finished about twenty minutes before the hockey team was scheduled to practice and Mike knew as he threw his sweater on over his head that he only had a couple more minutes before they would all be filing into the locker room.

He was just lacing up his sneakers when he heard the unmistakable rumble of hockey players filled his ears and he groaned. Mike was buddies with a couple of the guys on the team, but as a group, he wasn't a huge fan. Truthfully, they kind of scared him, he didn't understand how some people could be so *large* .

"Hey, Mike." Mike smiled, zipping up his bag and looking up at Lucas Sinclair, one of Mike's friends on the team.

“Hey, Lucas.” Dustin Henderson, Mike’s other friend was trailing behind Lucas, a doughnut in his mouth and he threw Mike a wave, which Mike returned.

Dustin and Lucas were pretty much the antithesis of the rest of the dudes that played hockey at the rink, which was probably the reason that Mike actually liked them and was friends with them. Dustin, while just as big and beefy as some of his teammates, was also the biggest softie that Mike had ever met and from what Mike had seen of the team playing, Dustin wasn’t a very aggressive player, either. Lucas on the other hand was built more like Mike, with just a bit more muscle, tall and lean, he was the fast guy on the ice, ducking in and around players in order to score.

They had all become friends when Dustin had spotted Mike wearing the D&D t-shirt that Nancy had gotten him for Christmas, which he had hardly ever worn outside of the house but it had been laundry day so it was quite literally the only clean shirt he had that day, and excitedly started talking to him about some campaign him and Lucas had done in high school. They had all quickly realized that they all were weird and nerdy about pretty much all the same things and the rest was pretty much history.

They were still the only friends that Mike had in the city outside of his sister.

“We heard about Nancy, man. That blows.” Dustin said, throwing his jacket into his locker and readjusting the curls on his head after removing his hat. “Not that she’s having a baby, miracle of life and all, but that now you don’t have a partner. That sucks major ass.”

Dustin shook his head sadly, while Lucas eyed him skeptically. Mike could only chuckle, grateful for the sympathy.

“Yeah, I mean, the timing could have been a lot better, there’s only like a year now until the Olympics, but everything happens for a reason I guess.” Mike shrugging, shouldering his bag. “I started training with a new partner, so we’ll see how that goes.”

“Well good luck, man.” Lucas said, clapping Mike on the shoulder. “We gotta get going, coach is gonna murder our asses if we don’t get

out there.” He directed to Dustin, who merely grumbled, still in the process of removing his jeans.

“I’ll see you guys later.” Mike said, maneuvering around the benches. He turned when he reached the door, facing Lucas and Dustin again, who were bickering in front of their open lockers. “Hey Lucas, how’d your date go last night?” Mike asked.

Lucas could only blush, his adam’s apple bobbed as he gulped and Mike chuckled, shaking his head as he pushed himself out of the locker room.

He was still laughing to himself when he entered the lobby, ready to just go home and sleep for the rest of the day. His whole body had a dull ache to it and he realized he hadn’t actually skated since Friday, which is the longest he’d gone in a long time.

But just as he was stifling a yawn and moving towards the front door, he noticed something that made him realize that, not for the first time in the last twenty four hours, that things in life were not ever going to go as he expected.

El was hovering around in the lobby, wistfully eyeing the trophies that lined the cases that sat just outside the rink doors. This included the gold medal that belonged to Mrs. Byers herself, which she had won years ago during her only Olympic appearance. Apparently, it was about a month after that Olympics that she had gotten pregnant with Jonathan, so she said goodbye to her skating career and opened the rink about a year later.

“Oh, there you are.” El said after a second, having turned around and noticed him looking at her, which he himself hadn’t even realized he was doing. She said it almost like she had been waiting for him, and honestly at this point, Mike wouldn’t have been surprised if she was.

“What are you doing?” Mike asked, raising his eyebrow. As much as he loved this rink and he definitely spent more time here sometimes than he did his own apartment, he wasn’t exactly a fan of hanging around any longer than he had to.

“I know that one of the things you said to me yesterday was that we

don't know each other that well, so I figured, maybe we should get to know each other." She said with a small shrug. El had changed out of her practice clothes, which had been spandex leggings and a fleece sweatshirt and was now wearing jeans and an oversized sweater, her hair that had been tied out earlier now framing her face in soft curls. "So, I was wondering if maybe you wanted to grab something to eat. I know I'm always hungry after practicing."

Mike's gut instinct was to say no. Eating after practicing was something he had *always* done with Nancy, it was a treasured tradition of the Wheeler siblings and Mike wasn't sure if he was ready to share that tradition with someone else.

Too bad his stomach chose to betray him by growling, very loudly he might add, which caused El to smirk at him. "Sounds like you're hungry." She commented, looking like she was trying really hard not to laugh.

"Yeah, I guess I could eat." Mike grumped, adjusting his bag on his shoulder and gesturing at El to lead the way out of the rink, which she did with a smile on her face. Mike could only sigh as he followed on her heels.

And as the cold late morning air hit his face, it also seemed to hit him how different his life had become in such a short time.

El ended up leading him to the diner that they had run into each other at the day previous.

However, she didn't lead them through the front door, the entrance that customers were *supposed* to use. Instead she led him around the back, looking back at him with a smile as she directed them down a back alley.

Mike was only like twenty five percent sure she wasn't going to murder him and leave his body out here to rot.

“Here, we can go in this way.” She said when they reached what seemed to be the back entrance. There was a dumpster to the left and a bucket with about a thousand cigarette butts sitting in it to the right of the door. He wrinkled his nose, thoroughly confused and still not entirely convinced she wasn’t going to kill him.

“Are we allowed back here?” He whispered as they entered the building. The greasy diner smell hit him like a eighteen wheeler, and he could see El breathing it in, a serene smile crossing her face.

“My dad’s friends with the owner.” She said with a shrug, not elaborating. Mike merely nodded, following her once again as she led them with ease through the back of the diner and into the kitchen.

When they entered the kitchen, Mike felt a weird calmness come over him and he didn’t know if it was the familiar smell of hamburgers being grilled or the smile on the face of the man in front of the grill that was making him feel that way. The man was a pretty large dude, larger than any of the dudes on the hockey team and frankly larger than any guy Mike had ever seen before, but he smiled warmly at them when he saw them and El immediately left Mike’s side to hug him.

“Ellie, there’s my favorite girl.” The man said with a laugh, squeezing El’s body slightly. Mike smiled. This man, Benny he presumed, gave off a strong fatherly vibe, stronger than any vibe Mike had ever gotten from his own father, and Mike understood why El was so excited to see him and why she was smiling so brightly at him.

“Who might you be?” Benny asked once El had removed herself from his embrace. The question wasn’t harsh, and Mike took a step forward, holding his hand out.

“Mike.”

“My skating partner.” El clarified, giving Benny a smile. Benny looked down at her and they were a look passed between them that Mike didn’t quite understand, but it passed before he could dwell on it too much.

“Nice to meet you, Mike.” Benny said, shaking Mike’s hand. “Now,

you two get out of here, sit wherever you are, order whatever you want, you know the drill Ellie.”

El gave him another bright smile, leaning up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek. She then was grabbing Mike’s arm again and was dragging him from the kitchen, Mike was barely able to get out a “Nice to meet you too!” to Benny before him and El were in the dining area and out of the kitchen.

Wordlessly El lead them over to the same booth he had found her in the day before and sat down in the same spot, leading him to take the seat opposite her. It was less tense then it had been last time, but still very much as awkward.

“He seems nice.” Mike said after a couple moments of silence. “You said he was friends with your dad?”

El smiles and nods. Mike notices that she’s not looking at him, but rather at the table, her finger running along the glass. “Yeah, they went to high school together. When I wanted to move out here, one of the only reasons my dad agreed to it was because Benny as here and could keep an eye on me.”

“That must be nice, to have someone in the city whose familiar. When I moved here, my sister was the only person I knew.” El flicks her eyes up at that, and Mike shrugs. “I’ve made some friends since then but I never had anyone like Benny.”

A fond look crosses El’s face and she looks like she wants to respond to Mike’s statement, but instead she clears her throat awkwardly and shuffles in her seat.

“So, how long have you and your sister been partners?”

Mike sighs, running his fingers through his hair. “We first started skating together when I was about ten, but didn’t start skating in competitions as pairs until I was thirteen, so that would be about eleven years as official partners.”

It was crazy to think that he spent eleven years with Nancy by his side and that had all changed in an instant. El gave him a small smile

and Mike felt his heart do a weird flip. That was definitely *not* a good sign. Because, as much as today had been a success and El was nice enough he still didn't really want her to officially be his partner.

He just couldn't shake the idea that it was supposed to be Nancy sitting across from him instead.

"Wow. And how long have you actually been skating?" Mike didn't know if El was asking because she was genuinely curious or if she was just trying to make conversation. Mike supposed he would rather make skating small talk than sit in awkward silence.

"I started when I was three." El's eyes widened slightly, her mouth falling into a small 'o' shape. "My mom dragged me to one of Nancy's practices one day when my babysitter cancelled and I thought it looked like fun so I asked if I could take lessons too. My mom, probably a little desperate to get us off her hands for a couple hours on Saturdays signed me up and I've been at it ever since."

"That's a long time." Mike nodded, folding his hands together on the table.

"Yeah, I honestly can't remember a time when I wasn't skating. It feels like it's just always been a part of who I am." El nodded, likely in understanding.

"I know exactly what you mean." She replied with a sigh, crossing her arms in front of her on the table and leaning forward. "When I was eighteen, I broke my ankle, was out for ten weeks." She frowned, almost like despite how long ago it happened, the memory was still fresh and hurt as much as it had back then. "It was the worst ten weeks of my life, I didn't move from the couch, I was grumpy and irritated."

"I couldn't even imagine being out for that long, I would have gone crazy."

El snorted, nodding. "Trust me, I did go crazy, at least it certainly feels like I did. I was so scared that they were going to tell me that I could never skate again." Her breath hitched, a unreadable look crossing her face. "I had no idea what I would do if I couldn't skate,

skating is all I am.”

Mike felt a strange need to comfort her then. He wanted to reach across the table and hold her hand or even get up and slide in next to her so he could give her a hug, but he doesn't. Because she's not even his friend and he's probably the last person she wants any kind of comfort from.

There's a small voice in the back of his head trying to tell him that it means something that his first instinct was to comfort her, but Mike knows that's not true. He only wanted to offer her some sort of comfort because it was the right thing to do, that's all.

(*Right?*)

He pushes that all away with a small shake of his head, realizing that the moment has passed and El has gone back to eyeing the table.

“So, how long have you been skating?” He asks after a moment, bringing the conversation back to small talk. Much better this way.

“Since I was about thirteen. But I had been obsessed for years before that.” Mike's honestly kind of amazed by her statement. He had seen what she could do and it was pretty phenomenal that she had managed to get there with only ten years of training.

“What made you decide to finally take lessons?”

“I always wanted to take lessons but it wasn't until my dad adopted me that I was able to take them.” El said, a small shrug reaching her shoulders. “But, I was homeschooled, so he wanted me to have some sort of social interaction with kids my own age, so skating lessons it was.”

There's a small beat of silence between them. Mike realizes that during some part of their conversation they had been brought glasses of water and he takes a small sip of his.

“I didn't know that you were adopted.” Mike finally says, and El laughs. The noise is loud and startles the woman sitting at the booth behind them.

She raises her eyebrows at him, an amused smirk on her lips. "Mike, you do realize that this is the first real conversation we've ever had that hasn't been about us being partners. Why would you have known?"

Mike shrugs, his face hot and no doubt turning bright red as he fully realizes just how dumb his comment had been.

"I mean, I'm sure people at the rink say things about me, but I doubt that's something they talk about."

"Why would people at the rink be talking about you?" Mike asks. "I mean, outside of just like, your skating."

He knows that sometimes gossip spreads around, he had overheard some of it in the locker room on occasion, none of it ever seemed to be about him, or Nancy for that matter, so he never bothered to really listen to it. Most of the time he seemed to be about people hooking up or cheating on each other, real high school kind of gossip, so it really wasn't worth Mike's time and energy.

"You've never heard?" She seems surprised, Mike almost has the audacity to be offended. Did she think that he listened to rumors and believed them, that certainly didn't sound like she thought very highly of him.

"No." He replies sharply, crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't listen to stupid shit like that." He adds with an eye roll. El has the decency to look a little embarrassed by her assumption, her cheeks turning slightly pink, but she doesn't look like she regrets her words.

"I'm just saying, it's hard not to hear about it when literally everyone talks about it and everyone thinks that it's true." El says, not exactly elaborating on what exactly it is that people say about her. Mike doesn't want to even bother asking, it seems like a touchy subject and things feel weird and tense now so he doesn't want to risk saying anything that could cause a repeat of what happened this morning.

"Well, I don't listen to shit like that." Mike bristles as he speaks, still slightly offended at her accusation. El just smiles slightly, her lips pursed together.

The conversation drops after that, food that Mike doesn't even remember ordering, but is exactly what he wanted off the menu, arriving only a couple minutes later, giving them an excuse to sit in silence. Mike finds himself glancing at El every couple of seconds, but she seems to be in her own little world, her eyes trained on the street outside the window.

He wonders if something he said made her upset. His heart squeezes at that thought and suddenly the burger that he's eating doesn't seem to appealing anymore.

It goes cold on his plate, perfectly mirroring him and El's conversation.

When they leave the diner side by side about fifteen minutes later, the air has chilled significantly and signs of snow linger in the air.

"Well, I live that way." El says, pulling the bottom of the hat she'd manifested from her bag over top her curls and gesturing in the opposite direction of Mike's apartment.

He wonders if he should offer to walk her home, but after the way their conversation had trailed off and how awkwardly things currently stood between them, Mike didn't think that was such a great idea. El didn't exactly look like she was waiting for him to offer, she already was taking steps in the direction of her apartment, only slightly anticipating a response from him.

"Oh well, my apartment is that way." He replied, pointing in the general opposite direction. El nodded, curling his bottom lip between her teeth. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

His question seems to surprise her, like she had forgotten, or thought that something had caused their deal to be called off, that they were supposed to be practicing for the rest of the week too. Even though after all was said and done, he missed Nancy and he wasn't sure if

him and El were exactly clicking, practice hadn't gone horribly wrong and it was probably worth meeting again.

"Uh yeah, same time?" El looks confused before shaking her head. "I mean, yeah, our rink reservation is for the same time, so that's when we'll meet."

Mike smiles tightly, shoving his hands into his pockets, the chill of the air biting his skin. "I promise I'll try not to be late this time."

There's a slight pause before El breaks into a round of light laughter. "Sounds good. See you tomorrow. Goodbye, Mike."

She turns, not giving him a chance to respond, disappearing around the corner at the end of the street before he even has a chance to lift his hand up to wave.

"Bye El." He whispers to himself, his heart swooping in his chest. He didn't really know what that meant and he didn't really want to think about it too much either. The only thing he really did know is that this was going to be a long week and he was about ninety percent sure that he was totally fucked.

One day down, three to go.

Notes for the Chapter:

whew, what a day that was huh? i've decided that chapters are gonna be in alternating povs, so the next chapter will be the next day of practice but with el's pov. also a new character is gonna be introduced next chapter, someone who hasn't even been mentioned yet and i'm very excited about it. please let me know what you think and i apologize again for the long wait.

anyways, thank you guys so much for reading, comment if you want, if you don't that's cool too. as always feel free to hit me up on tumblr (janehoppers.tumblr.com) if you wanna chat about anything, fic related or not. i don't know when the

next chapter will be but i'm hoping it'll come faster
then this one, fingers crossed at least.

thanks friends! until next time!